

4th Sunday of Lent B

It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God. (Ep 2:8)



First Reading

2 Chronicles 36:14-16.19-23

All the heads of the priesthood, and the people too, added infidelity to infidelity, copying all the shameful practices of the nations and defiling the Temple that the Lord had consecrated for himself in Jerusalem. The Lord, the God of their ancestors, tirelessly sent them messenger after messenger, since he wished to spare his people and his house. But they ridiculed the messengers of God, they despised his words, they laughed at his prophets, until at last the wrath of the Lord rose so high against his people that there was no further remedy.

Their enemies burned down the Temple of God, demolished the walls of Jerusalem, set fire to all its palaces, and destroyed everything of value in it. The survivors were deported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon; they were to serve him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. This is how the word of the Lord was fulfilled that he spoke through Jeremiah, "Until this land has enjoyed its sabbath rest, until seventy years have gone by, it will keep sabbath throughout the days of its desolation." And in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord that was spoken through Jeremiah, the Lord roused the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to issue a proclamation and to have it publicly displayed throughout his kingdom: "Thus speaks Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; he has ordered me to build him a Temple in Jerusalem, in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him! Let him go up.'"

Second Reading

Ephesians 2:4-10

God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ – it is through grace that you have been saved – and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven, in Christ Jesus.

This was to show for all ages to come, through his goodness towards us in Christ Jesus, how infinitely rich he is in grace. Because it is by grace that you have been saved,

through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.

Gospel

John 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus: The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. No one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already, because he has refused to believe in the name of God's only Son. On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God.

Meditation

It is a paradox of human living that signs of death are so frequently signs of healing. To this day the ancient caduceus, one or two snakes wrapped around a pole, stands as a sign of a pharmacist or physician. We know that the venom of vipers is used to make the antidote which heals those bitten by the same snakes. Despite the commonness of this paradox we still find it difficult to say "Amen" to Jesus' preaching of death as the way to life.

All of us wants to be lifted up – but not upon the cross. All of us want to have eternal life – but none of us wants to die. When it comes to matters of sin and alienation the cure seems worse than the disease.

The prophet Jeremiah attempted to point out the same sort of paradox to his people. Was it truly possible that God could restore the nation at the hand of Cyrus, the king of Persia? We do not look to the enemy for healing and integrity. But God is always breaking through human expectations. Paul knew that whenever we begin to think that healing is wrought by our own hands then we begin to think in very restricted categories. If healing and wholeness are God's work then the possibilities are as limitless as they are undeserved.

Lent is an invitation to think the impossible and to live in impossible ways. Whoever rejects the impossible chooses condemnation. Whoever believes, whoever dares to live lifted up with Christ on the cross, is drawn with Christ to God.